

REACTIONS OF EMPLOYERS IN THE  
ST. LOUIS SHOE INDUSTRY TO THE  
EMPLOYMENT OF THE BLIND  
Ruth Irene Kress

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

George Warren Brown School of Social Work

REACTIONS OF EMPLOYERS

IN THE ST. LOUIS SHOE INDUSTRY

TO THE EMPLOYMENT OF THE BLIND

by

Ruth Irene Kress

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A dissertation presented to The George Warren  
Brown School of Social Work at Washington  
University in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master  
of Social Work

June, 1948

Saint Louis, Missouri



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the author's name, and the date of publication. The first page of the manuscript is dated "1804" and the last page is dated "1805". The manuscript is written in a cursive hand, with some corrections and additions in a different ink. The text is in German, and the title of the manuscript is "WIDMER-SCHMIDT". The manuscript is a copy of a play by Schiller, and it includes a list of characters and a summary of the plot. The manuscript is a valuable historical document, providing insight into the author's creative process and the evolution of his work.

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## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the course of this study the writer noted that reactions of employers in the shoe industry of St. Louis toward employment of the blind were, as one might expect, quite varied but capable of description in terms of favorable and unfavorable attitudes.

First of all, employment of the blind is not affected, favorably or otherwise, by some previously formulated policy of the shoe companies. There is no statement or unwritten agreement in their personnel policies that an employee must have a certain amount of vision. Even the one company that gives each applicant a physical examination and prefers vision of 20/40 reading and 1.76 distance, does not exclude the person whose vision does not meet this standard but rather has a special board to consider applicants falling short of the ideal requirements. Thus, the prospect of employment of the blind lies not in company policy but in the individual employer reactions to that employment. This was assumed at the onset of the study and the data gained supports such assumption.

The majority of the employers interviewed began their careers at the bottom of the shoe production line; that is, on unskilled tasks and have worked their way through the various shoe manufacturing processes in the plants to their present positions. They entered this industry when it was in its infancy and primarily a family affair -- each worker was known to every other worker and to the employer. Through the years these factories have enlarged, expanded, and a number have moved outside the City limits. Except in a few factories the employer has lost sight



of the individual employee; he no longer knows him by name and he has attempted to do little about this situation, such as establishing a personnel department and promoting company interest among the employees. These old-time employers are, on the whole, operating their factories under the old philosophy of putting a man to work to see what he can do and making little attempt to match his qualifications with the requirements of the job upon application. This is particularly true of the smaller shoe companies. A trend toward development of personnel departments seems to be under way as evidenced in the formation of four of these in the sample companies in the past four years.

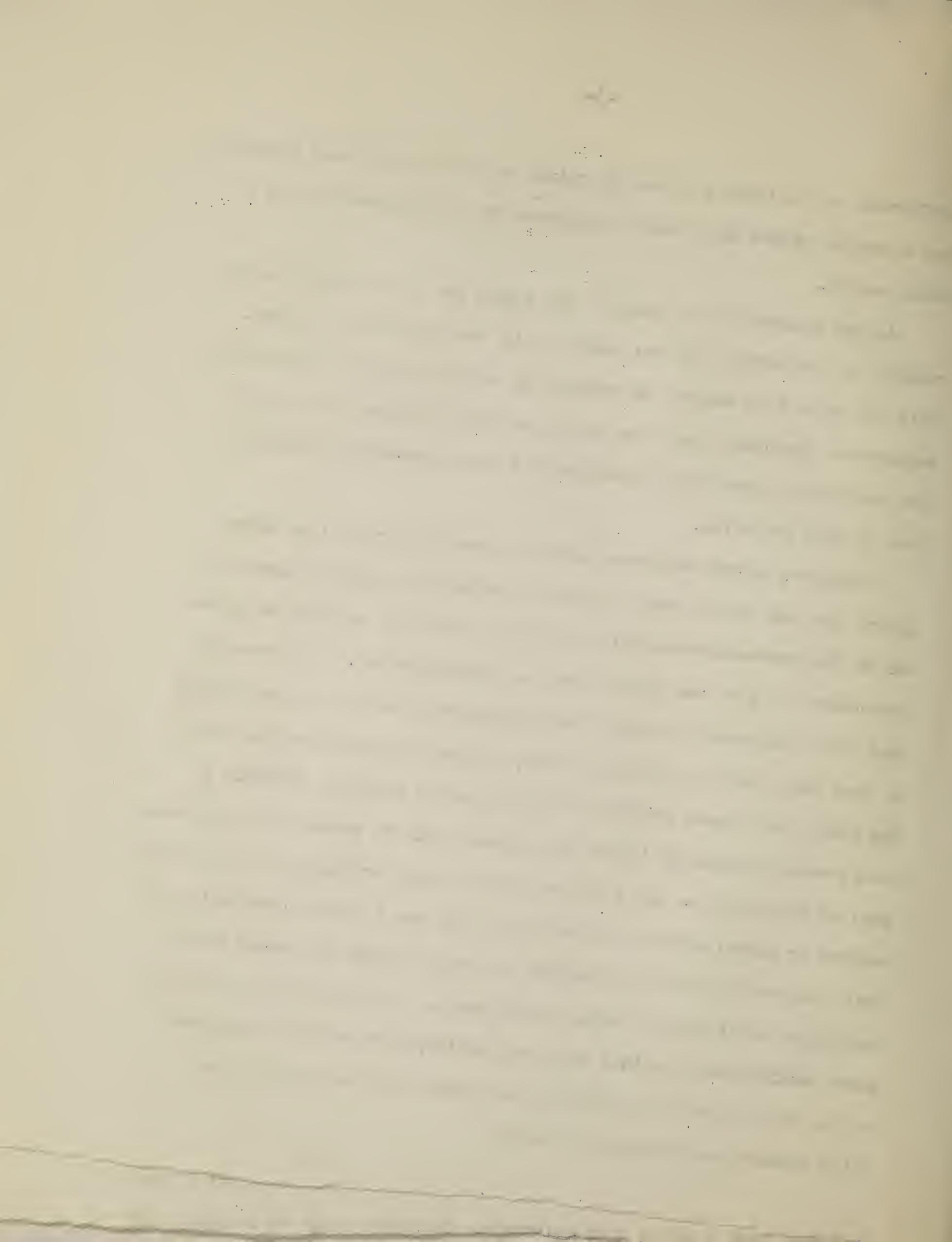
Employers' reactions to blind persons as employees were separate and isolated from their general reaction to other handicapped people. There was very minor variation in their willingness to hire deaf, cardiacs, and amputees. The majority of the employers have had previous experience with these and believe there are many unskilled and semi-skilled and some of the highly skilled jobs that can be performed by such handicapped. There was unanimous agreement that an applicant with a contagious disease in its infectious stage (tuberculosis and venereal disease) would be rejected. All employers would reject epileptics. Employers, on the other hand, were slower, more thoughtful, and less certain of their responses toward employment of the blind. This was probably due to the fact that the majority of the employers had no previous experience with such employees and had little contact with the subject itself. Five of these employers had had this experience. There was a decided difference in the speed and definiteness of the responses of these five employers. Therefore, lack of knowledge of



employment of the blind and lack of actual experience with such employees had a decided effect upon their willingness or unwillingness to try a blind worker.

As was assumed at the onset of the study, the blind worker is not capable of performing each and every job in the shoe making process. This was taken into account in setting up the study and in interviewing employers. Reactions that were sought and were received were toward the continuous, repetitive, unskilled and some semi-skilled kinds of jobs in shoe factories.

There was almost unanimous agreement among employers (two exceptions) that the blind worker, properly trained and properly placed in one of the above-described jobs, would be capable of an equal or better performance of the task itself than the sighted worker. This does not take into consideration any of the complementary factors to performance of that task, such as getting to work, getting materials, moving about the plant, and others which certainly cannot be ignored. However, it does concern a realistic factor that should first be taken into consideration in this study -- can a person without sight manipulate the particular machine or manual process of the task? This was a common denominator in that such manipulation is identical in every factory that makes use of particular unskilled and semi-skilled tasks. This is a basis for moving ahead realistically on this study and anticipation of blind employment in the shoe industry as it did point up that employers believe the blind workers can perform such tasks.

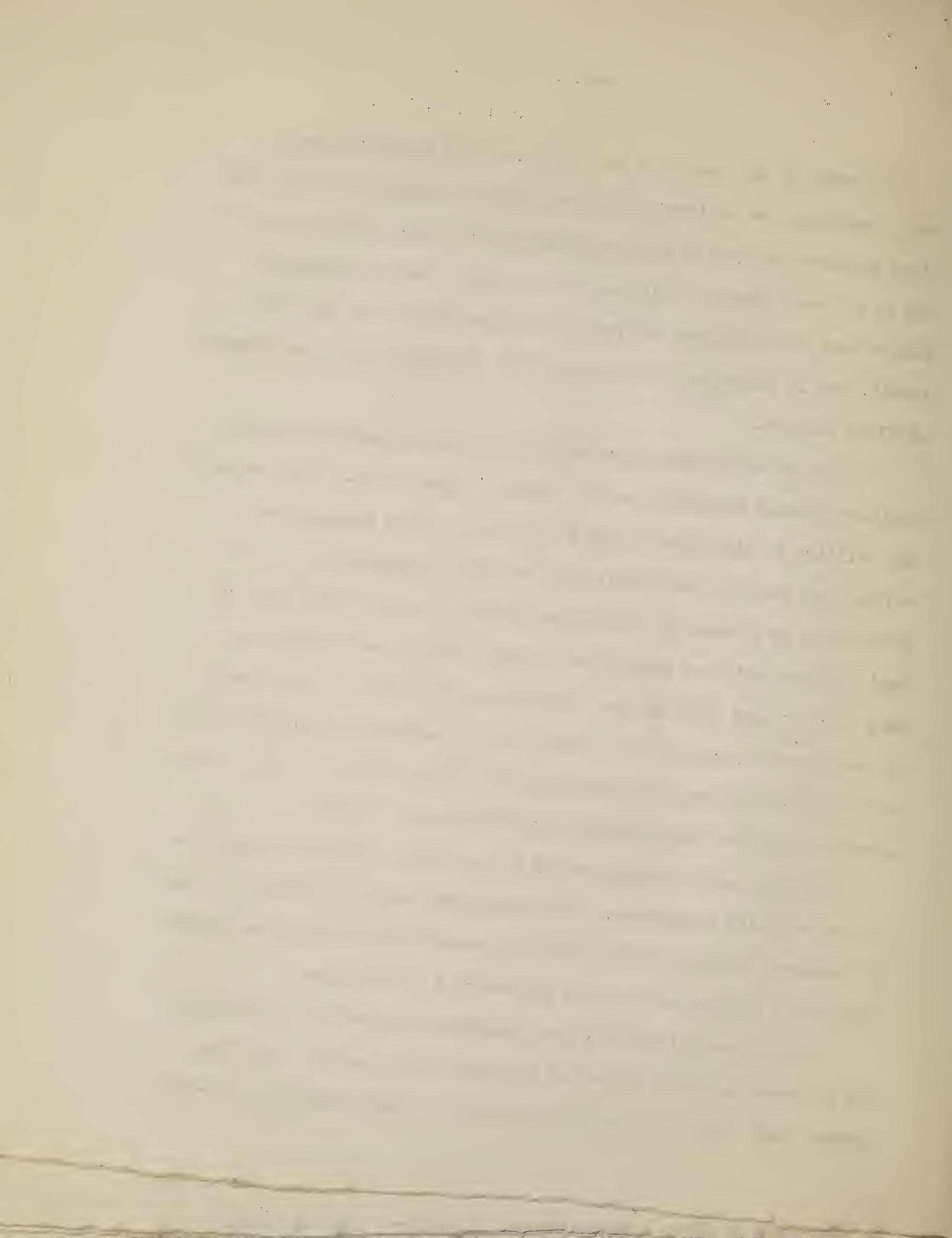


The crux of the study and the only practical basis on which to make conclusions on employer attitudes rested in their opinions of the blind worker's ability to perform effectively on these jobs as they are set up in their plants. This takes into account the complementary duties that are necessary before and after performance of the task itself, and is inclusive of all conditions affecting general employment of blind workers.

Eleven of the fifteen shoe company employers expressed favorable attitudes toward employment of the blind on select jobs. These employers were willing to hire blind workers in the event of a vacancy; were willing and anxious for contact with the blind placement agent; had previously, or planned in the future, to make a study of the jobs in their plants that were applicable to the blind worker's abilities; were able to list jobs at time of interview that they believed could be performed by the blind; and were able to recognize difficulties that might be faced in employing blind workers but believed these were surmountable and that satisfactory adjustment could be made.

Certainly such attitudes would be considered favorable toward the subject of blind employment. These employers were not expressing a kind of "armchair philosophy" when they expressed their opinions but further indicated a readiness to act on the basis of these ideas.

The employers (four) who were considered as reacting unfavorably had expressed negative attitudes to these same aspects. They were certain they could not use a blind worker in their plants. As far as

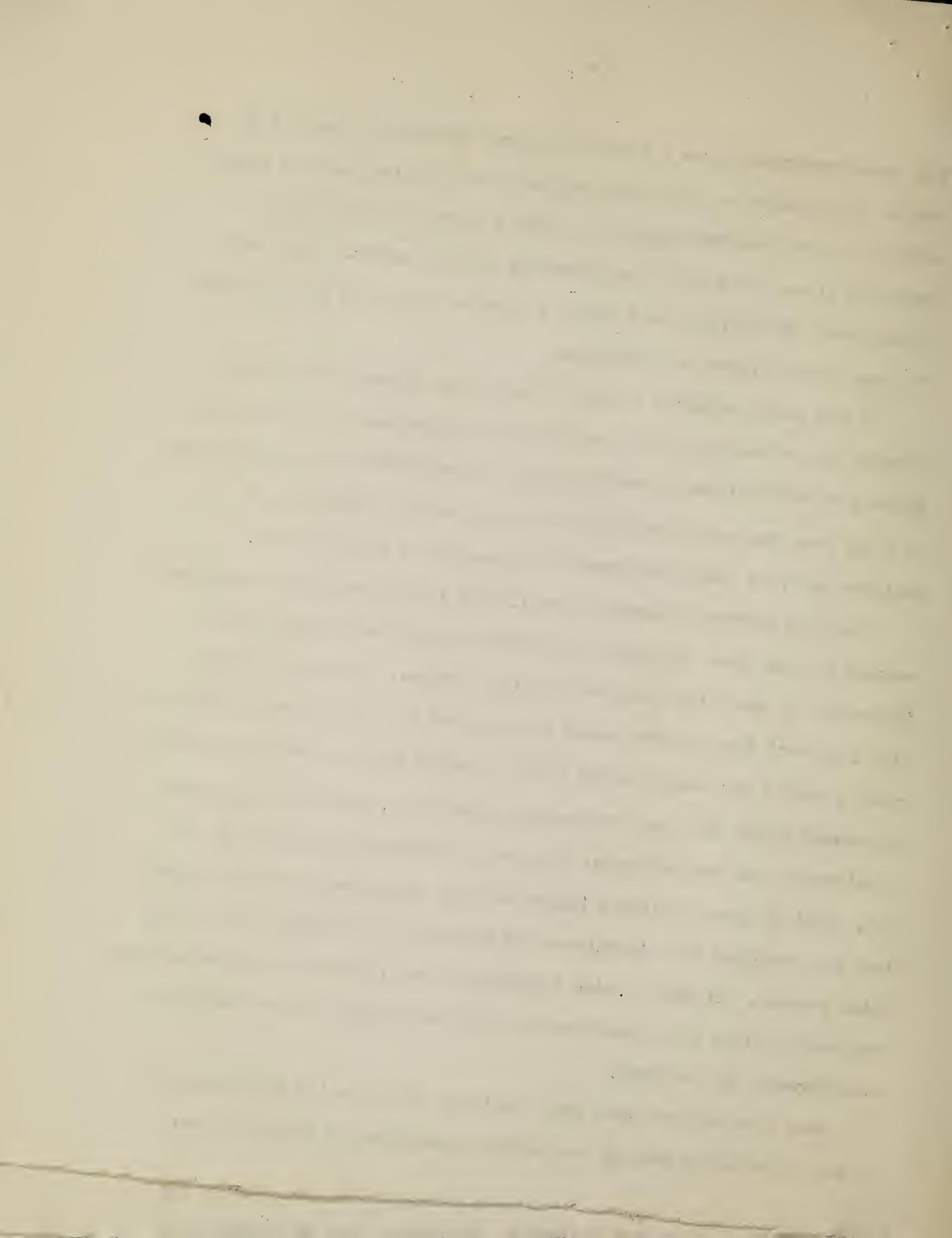


they were concerned it was a "closed and shut" matter and they had no desire or intention to act on this subject; that is, to observe a demonstration by the placement agent or to make a study in their plant to determine if any job could be performed by a blind worker. They could foresee many difficulties that would be involved and would be prohibitive to their present focus on production.

It was early indicated to the writer in the course of the interviewing and pointed up in the results of the study that the conditioning factors or difficulties or complementary duties involved in the performance of a job bore the most significant influence on the formulation of employer opinions toward employment or rejection of blind workers.

The major difficulty seemed to be finding the proper job and subsequent vacancy in that job. Employers felt that they and their foremen were inadequate to deal with placement of blind workers. They were able to list jobs that they believed could be performed by a blind person but indicated a desire for help from the blind placement agent in determining more accurately which jobs could be handled effectively, selecting the proper blind person for the particular job, and in training that person on the job. Most of these employers (there were two exceptions) did not believe they were equipped with techniques and methods of counseling and training blind workers. If such outside assistance were provided by outside agencies they were willing to try such workers and, in general, reacted favorably to employment of the blind.

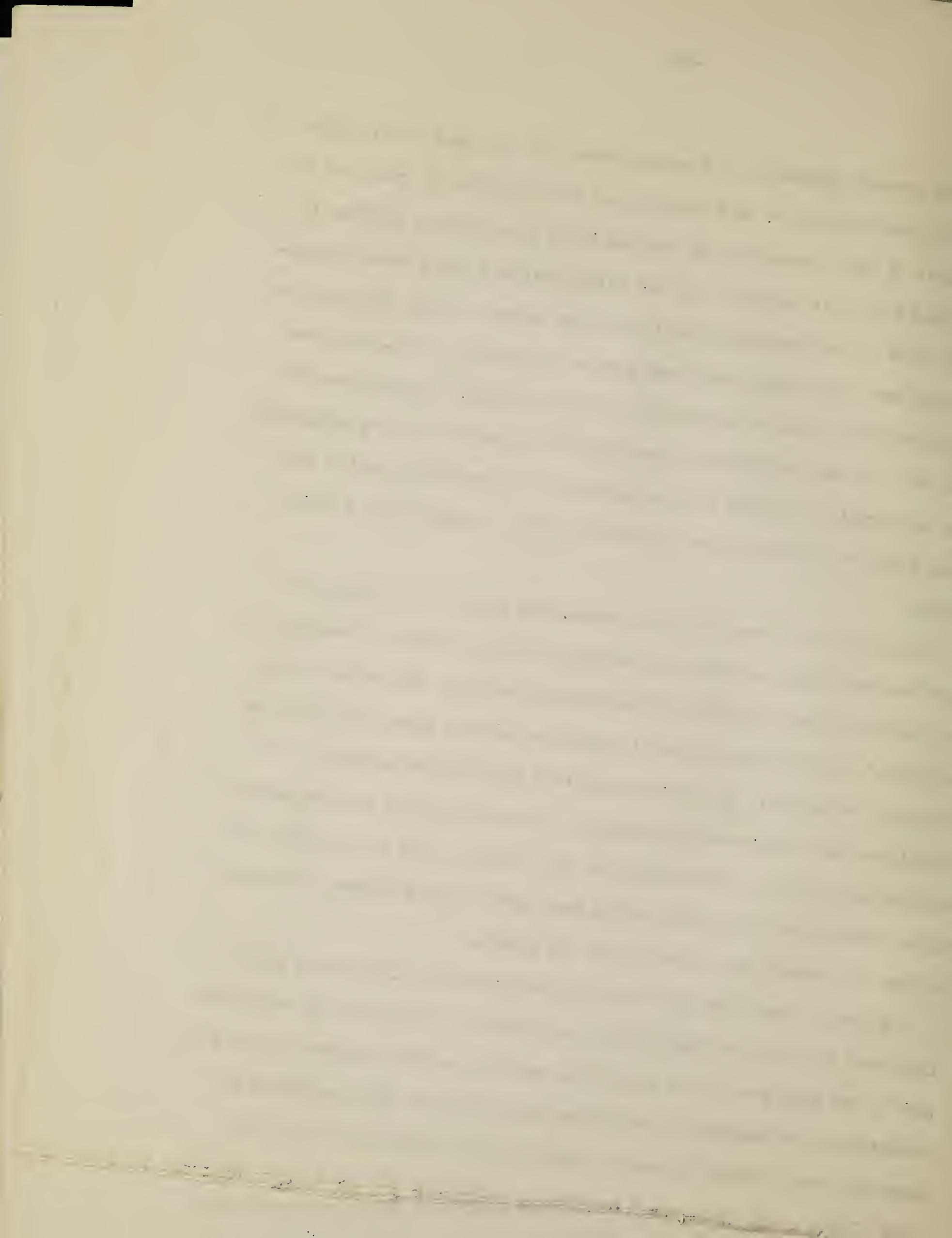
They also believed that such unskilled jobs were the least repeated in their plants and made up the smallest proportion of kinds of jobs.



There was general agreement that approximately 75 per cent of all jobs are considered skilled or semi-skilled and the remaining 25 per cent are unskilled. A fair proportion of the unskilled jobs require ability to read sizes and style numbers. In the final analysis there were approximately five to six generally unskilled jobs in each plant, repeated two and never more than three times and some not repeated at all, that employers believed could be performed by blind workers. The turnover on these jobs has been relatively irregular and although they are presently being performed by sighted workers eleven of the employers stated that in the event of a vacancy they would be willing to substitute a blind worker.

Getting to and from work, wash room, and getting and passing on materials were seen as real difficulties to blind persons. However, all but four employers believed some adjustment could be made both to the employers' and the blind workers' advantage so that these would not be bases for rejection. It was believed that the sighted workers could facilitate such adjustment by passing on shoe racks in a routine manner eliminating variation of position of the rack and also by assisting the blind worker about the plant and to work until he has become accustomed to the environment and direction of the plant.

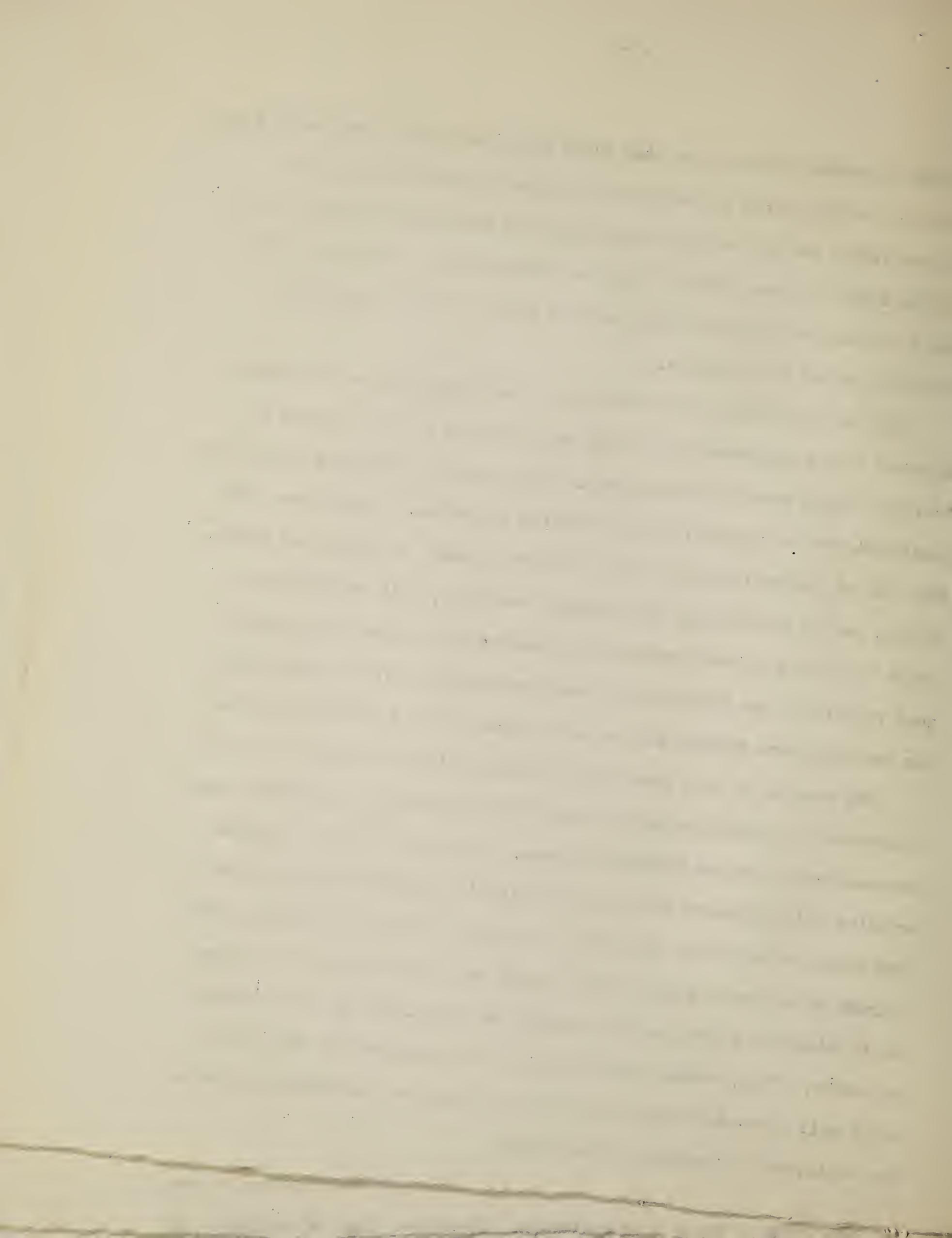
Although these are the most frequently stated difficulties it is important to point out that what is considered a difficulty in one plant and by one employer is not considered such by another employer. The shoe industry is monotonously repetitious as to kinds of jobs performed in each and every plant. However, there is great diversity among these same plants as to the manner in which a particular job is set up and the



working conditions inherent in that plant and about a job. Because a blind worker is pulling lasts in one plant he cannot always pull lasts in another plant, for the second concern may pull theirs by size which would require sight, or last pulling might be combined with inspection of the shoe for flaws or irregularities, both of which would be beyond the abilities of the blind person.

This is significant information and a very major factor that must be taken into consideration by those organizations who are engaged in "selling" blind workers to employers. They must know the jobs as they are practiced, not in general, but in specific factories. They cannot take the risk of jeopardizing the blind worker's chances of performing effectively, nor of influencing the employer adversely, both of which they would do if they naively assumed that because they placed and received good reports on one blind worker on a particular job in one plant they can readily place another worker on the same job in a different plant.

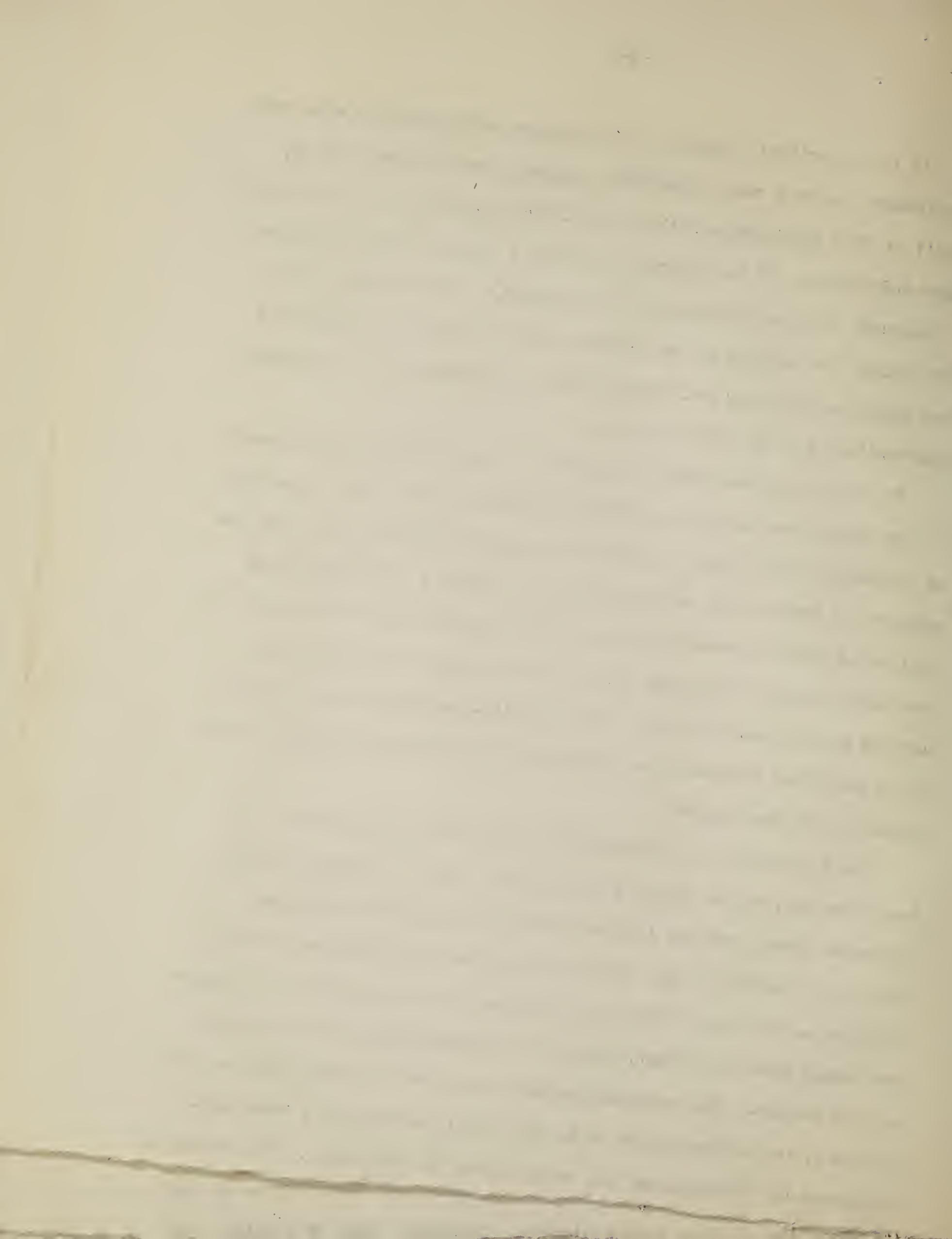
The results of this study have emphasized that if agents of these interested organizations hope to "sell" blind workers to employers their approach must be on an individual basis. Newspaper reports, magazine articles and Institutes that are conducted to acquaint employers with what blind workers have done will not reach the individual employer nor a group of employers for the very results that are discussed in these may be situations that are not feasible in the plants of the attending employers. Thus, rather than enlisting their cooperation such method might well serve to confirm any doubts the employer might have concerning employment of workers without sight.



It is the writer's opinion that employers have tended to view such educational programs most objectively, assuming an attitude such as, "Isn't it fine that people without sight have performed so effectively in other industries. It is a worthy cause and I lend my stamp of approval to the work of these interested organizations." Unfortunately, they have missed the purpose of the program and have failed to consider if they might participate, not through financial support, but in availing opportunities for the blind worker.

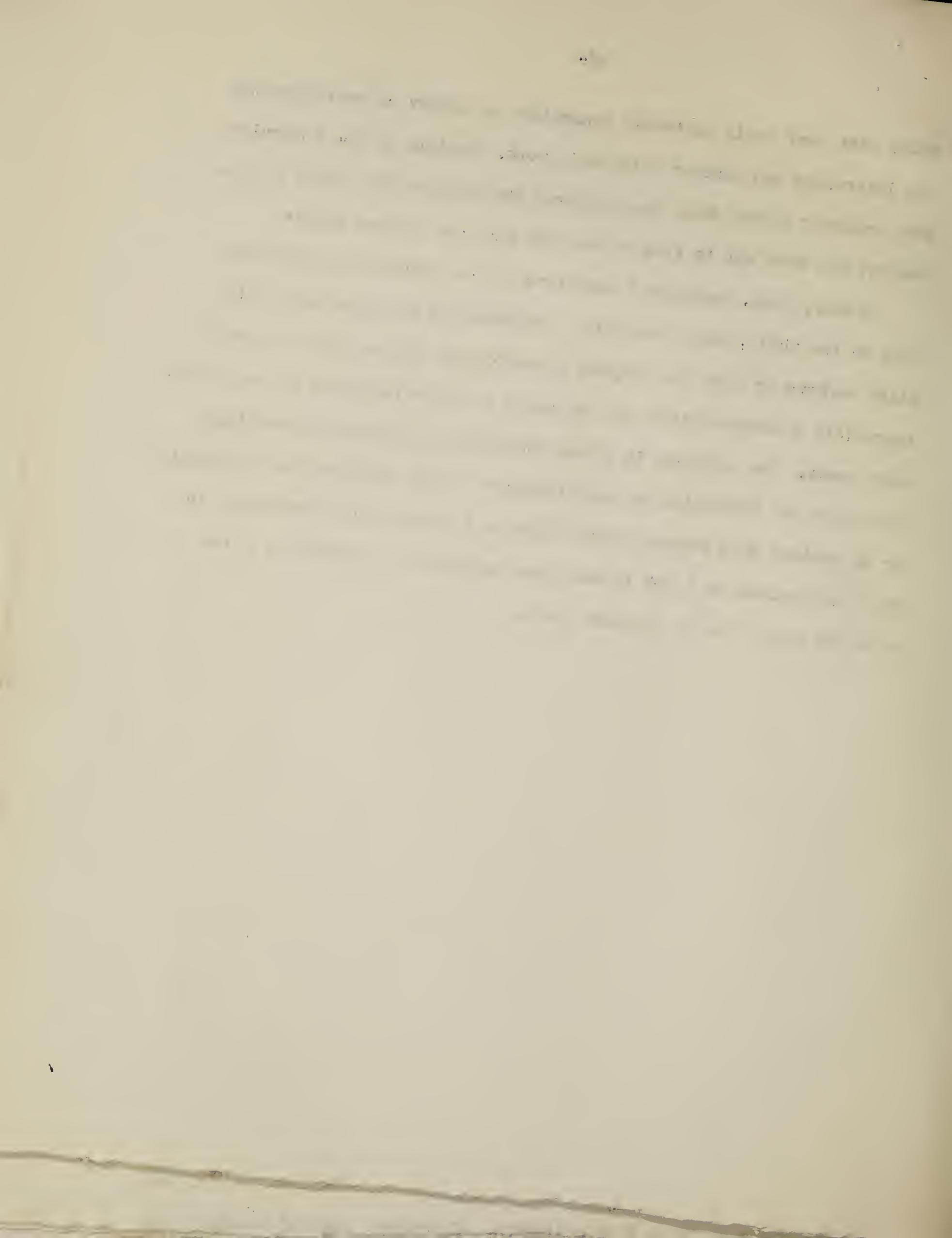
It would seem then that the approach to the problem of employment for the blind must be on an individual employer basis. The counseling or placement agency must be willing to cooperate fully by assisting the employer or taking full responsibility for making a job study of the particular plant in order to select those jobs that can be performed by the blind worker. They must also continue to train the individual workers on the job. This is a slow and time-consuming process but is not a satisfied customer (the employer) and a satisfied employee (blind worker) worth the effort?

Now is the time to intensify the effort in this direction. Employers are, on the whole, not satisfied with the restless and discontented labor, and are looking forward to more stable workers. This was indicated in this study by the comments of employers to the question -- did they believe the presence of a blind worker in a department would have any effect, favorable or unfavorable, on the average sighted worker. The unanimous opinion was no noted effect; but, in each instance, the employer went on to say that labor has hit a "new low". Employees are discontented and uninterested in their jobs. The employers



added that they would certainly appreciate an influx of employees who are interested and content with their work. Earlier in the interview each employer stated that they believed the blind worker would be more content and more apt to stay on the job than the sighted worker.

Briefly then, employers' reactions to the employment of the blind are, on the whole, most favorable. Few have had any experience with blind workers or with the subject of employment of the blind and would appreciate a demonstration and job study in their factories by the placement agent. The employer is little influenced by general discussions, literature or Institutes on the adjustment of the blind worker in industry or in another shoe factory since there is a great deal of variation in what is involved on a job in one plant and what is involved on a job with the same title in another plant.



## APPENDIX C

### SCHEDULE - OUTLINE FOR INTERVIEW

#### I PRELIMINARY DATA - EMPLOYERS, PERSONNEL POLICY, EMPLOYMENT QUALIFICATIONS.

##### A. Company Information

1. Name of company
2. Number of employees (each factory)
3. Volume of shoe production, per month (each factory)

##### B. Employer Information

1. Name of employer
2. Service in present position: (a) 1-3 years, (b) 3-5 years, (c) 5-10 years.
3. Service in shoe industry: (a) 1-5 years, (b) 5-15 years, (c) 15-30 years.
4. Other Employment Specify

##### C. Personnel Policy

1. Is the personnel policy of hiring new applicants dictated by executives and the employer the instrument for putting this policy into practice.
2. Does the employer evaluate each application independent of any assistance or recommendation of another member of the firm, be he executive or a foreman?
3. Does the employer evaluate each application and also assign approved applicants to jobs?
4. Does the employer make the final decision or approval of only those applicants first seen, approved and recommended by the foreman? Another interviewer?

##### D. Employment Requirements or Limitations

1. Must an applicant meet certain standards set forth by the policy makers to qualify for any job in this plant? What are these specifications in relation to the following:
  - a. Physical Qualifications:

(1) height	(4) hearing
(2) weight	(5) heart
(3) vision	(6) others. Specify.
  - b. Does a physical limitation automatically disqualify an applicant? If yes, list excluding disabilities.
  - c. Intelligence



## APPENDIX C

### D. Employment Requirements or Limitations (Cont.)

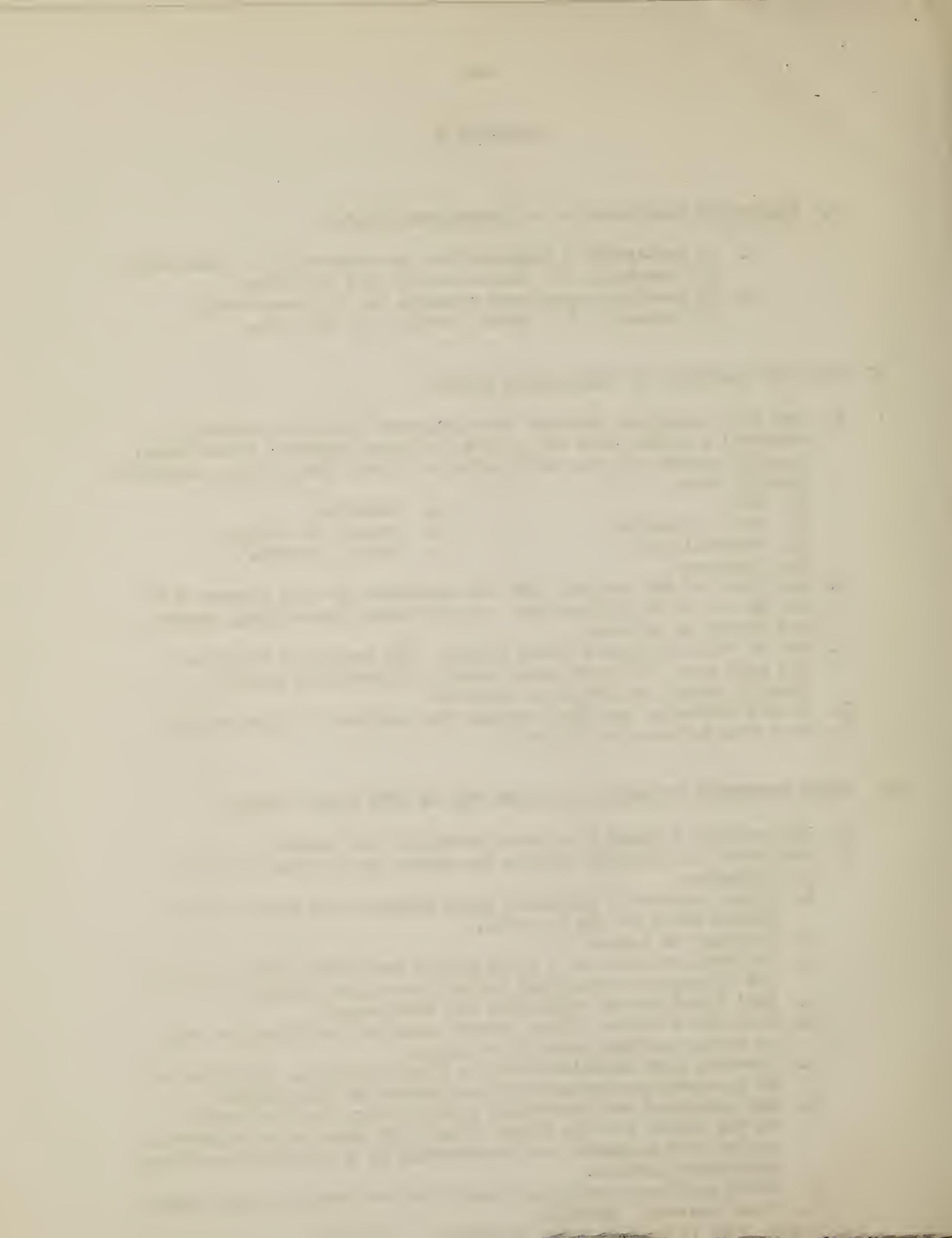
- d. Is pre-training required for approximately (1) one-fourth, (2) one-half, (3) three-fourths, (4) all jobs.
- e. Is previous experience required for (1) one-fourth, (2) one-half, (3) three-fourths, (4) all jobs.

## II EMPLOYER REACTIONS TO HANDICAPPED GROUPS

- A. Has the respective employer ever employed (for this concern or another) a worker with any of the following physical limitations: Specify number and over what period of time. Has he ever rejected? Specify same.
  - 1. Deaf
  - 2. Hard of hearing
  - 3. Tuberculosis
  - 4. Cardiacs
  - 5. Diabetic
  - 6. Amputee or cripple
  - 7. Other. Specify.
- B. Are there at the present time any employees in this concern with any of the above limitations? Specify which disability, number, and length of service.
- C. Has he ever employed a blind worker? (1) presently employing, (2) past year, (3) past three years, (4) past five years. Specify number and length of service.
- D. To his knowledge has this company ever employed a blind worker?
- E. What does he consider "blind"?

## III THOSE COMPANIES PRESENTLY EMPLOYING ONE OR MORE BLIND WORKERS

- A. Did employer himself hire these workers? Did another?
- B. What were his original reasons for hiring these blind workers:
  - 1. Sympathy.
  - 2. Blind industrial placement agent demonstrated that a blind person could do the job well.
  - 3. Shortage of labor.
  - 4. Had read or heard of a blind person performing well a similar job in mother company and wanted to see for himself.
  - 5. Felt blind person would work for less wages.
  - 6. Felt blind worker, given proper training, could perform well or better certain jobs in his plant.
  - 7. Previous good experience with a blind employee. (Satisfactory or better-than-average work performance in that plant.)
  - 8. Had completed satisfactorily a preparatory training course at the School for the Blind, Blind Work Shop, as an apprentice and/or, was counseled and recommended by a counseling service, employment service.
  - 9. Blind applicant presented himself and was treated accordingly.
  - 10. Other reasons. Specify.
- C. Has he ever rejected a blind applicant. Specify reasons. Increased



APPENDIX C

III THOSE COMPANIES PRESENTLY EMPLOYING ONE OR MORE BLIND WORKERS  
(Continued)

- E. Are there jobs in his plant that he believes a blind worker could perform? Specify.
- F. What kind of jobs or tasks does he feel a blind person could perform most satisfactorily in any industry?
- G. Has the blind placement agent ever demonstrated the performance of a blind worker on any particular job in his plant? What was his reaction?
- H. Has he ever requested permission to demonstrate? Was permission denied? Specify reasons.
- I. Are there difficulties that the employer foresees in blind employment? Specify. Can these difficulties be adjusted satisfactorily?

IV COMPANIES WHICH HAVE NO PRESENT BLIND EMPLOYEES AND HAVE NEVER EMPLOYED ANY

- A. Did employer himself reject any blind applicants? Approximate number.
- B. Employer's reasons for not hiring blind workers:
  - 1. Never confronted by a blind applicant.
  - 2. Confronted by a blind applicant or placement agent (specify which) but believed:
    - a. Lack of vision renders an individual absolutely helpless, incapable of adjusting to mechanized industry.
    - b. Nature of work in his plant has no job suited to employment of blind.
    - c. Employment of blind would require installation of expensive equipment adapted to needs of these workers.
    - d. Previous bad experience with a blind worker. Specify.
    - e. Other reasons. Specify.
- C. Would he be willing to try a blind worker?
- D. Are there jobs in his plant that he believes a blind worker could perform? Specify.
- E. What kind of jobs or tasks does he feel a blind person could perform most satisfactorily in any industry?
- F. Has the blind placement agent ever demonstrated the performance of a blind worker on any particular job in his plant? What was his reaction?
- G. Has he ever requested permission to demonstrate? Was permission denied? Specify reasons.
- H. Are there difficulties that the employer foresees in blind employment? Specify. Can these difficulties be adjusted satisfactorily?



APPENDIX C

V COMPANIES FORMERLY EMPLOYING BLIND WORKERS BUT NOT AT THE PRESENT TIME

- A. Did present employer hire former blind employees?
  - 1. What was the average number hired over the period of:
    - a. the past year (ending January, 1946)
    - b. past three years.
    - c. since the beginning of war (ending January, 1943).
  - 2. What were his reasons for hiring these blind workers:
    - a. Sympathy
    - b. Blind industrial placement agent demonstrated that a blind person could do the job well.
    - c. Shortage of labor.
    - d. Had read or heard of a blind person performing well a similar job in another company and wanted to see for himself.
    - e. Believed the blind person would work for less wages.
    - f. Believed the blind worker, given the proper training, could perform well, or better-than-average, certain jobs in his plant.
    - g. Previous good experience with a blind employee. (Satisfactory or better-than-average work performance in his plant.)
    - h. Had completed satisfactorily a preparatory training course at the School for the Blind, Blind Work Shop, as an apprentice and or, was counseled and recommended by a counseling service, employment service.
    - i. Blind applicant presented himself and was treated accordingly.
    - j. Other reasons. Specify.
- B. What were his reasons for termination of employment of blind workers:
  - 1. illness, 2. accident, 3. transfer, 4. resignation, 5. release.
- C. If release, did present employer release blind worker. Specify reasons.
- D. Reasons for no present blind employees:
  - 1. No applicants.
  - 2. Previous bad experience. Specify.
  - 3. No jobs available.
  - 4. Require use of expensive equipment.
  - 5. Labor market of sighted employees more plentiful than in war years.
  - 6. Other reasons. Specify.
- E. Would he be willing to again employ a blind worker?
- F. Are there jobs in his plant that he believes a blind worker could perform.
- G. What kinds of jobs or tasks does he believe a blind person could perform most satisfactorily in any industry?
- H. Has the blind industrial placement agent ever demonstrated the performance of a blind worker on any particular job in his plant? What was his reaction to such demonstration?



- I. Has he ever requested permission to demonstrate? Was permission denied? Specify reasons.
- J. Are there difficulties that the employer foresees in blind employment? Specify. Can these difficulties be adjusted satisfactorily?

VI EMPLOYER'S REACTION TO WORK PERFORMANCE OF BLIND IN COMPARISON TO THAT OF THE SIGHTED WORKER ON SELECT JOBS FOR WHICH HE HAS BEEN TRAINED

(This section of the schedule was used in interviewing each employer. It was proceeded in each instance by either Section III, IV, or V.)

A. Production: 1. extremely less, 2. less, 3. equal to, 4. greater than, 5. superior to.

\*Above opinion is based on experience with (number) of blind workers?

\*Would you say this was true (or would be true) of all blind workers? Majority? Average? Minority?

(The statements marked with an asterisk were asked in relation to each aspect of work performance).

B. Efficiency: 1. Extremely less, 2. less, 3. equal to, 4. greater than, 5. superior to.

C. Supervision

1. Require constant supervision in comparison with periodic supervision of the sighted.

2. Not constant, but more-than-average amount of supervision necessary.

3. Same amount as sighted.

4. Once adjusted to the job, required, or would require less.

5. Require no supervision other than initial orientation period and periodic, routine supervision of all employees.

D. Morale of average blind worker in the plant.

1. Extremely depressed, evidenced in work production and efficiency and withdrawal from any social participation.

2. Generally depressed, noted mainly in social relations and withdrawal from sighted worker groups.

3. No noted difference.

4. More content on the job and a greater interest in fellow workers.

5. Extremely interested in work, offering suggestions for improvement and constant mingling with other workers.

E. Morale and output of other employees in a department in which there is a blind worker.

1. Both are lessened as:

a. They must devote some of their time assisting the blind worker about the plant, to and from the plant for work.

b. Must assist the blind person with his work, getting materials, repairing temporarily jammed machinery, etc.

c. Spend time in clearing aisles and being very careful to give materials to the blind person in the same manner every day, explaining thoroughly any new change that the sighted worker would catch at a glance at his materials.

2. No noted difference.

3. Increased, as presence of a proficient blind worker is apt to serve as a stimulus:

a. In that the sighted might react that if the blind worker can produce thus and so in a certain amount of time, he, with sight,



- b. As the sighted person takes stock of himself and the convenience afforded him in his sight.
- c. As the blind person usually works diligently and cheerfully at his tasks.

d. Others. Specify.

F. Training

- 1. Require double the amount of on-the-job training than the sighted person needs.
- 2. Require more-than-average on-the-job training.
- 3. Require same amount of training.
- 4. Require less-than-average training as:
  - a. More interested, concentrate more and try harder as they realize job opportunities in the present day are limited to the sightless.
  - b. Very lack of vision offers less distraction.
  - c. Have developed keen finger skills and manipulative techniques through training in School for the Blind, Sheltered Work Shops, and others.
  - d. Other reasons.
- 5. Require a great deal less training.

G. Absenteeism

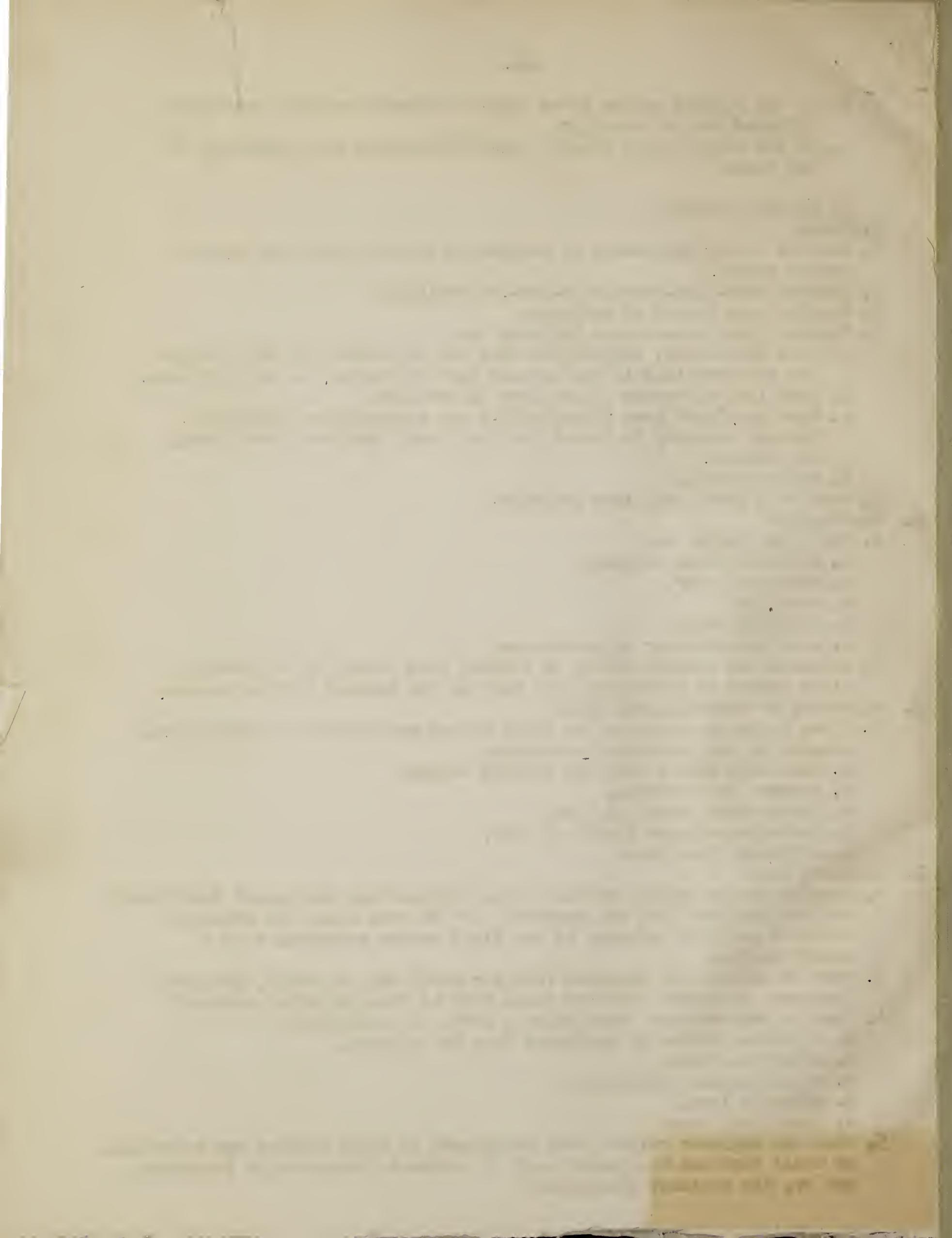
- 1. The blind worker is:
  - a. extremely less regular,
  - b. more irregular,
  - c. equal to,
  - d. slightly better,
  - e. much more regular in attendance.
- 2. Estimate the average number of working days missed by the average blind worker in comparison with that of the average sighted worker.

H. Adjusting to Technological Change

- 1. Given proper orientation the blind person can adjust to technological changes in his particular operation:
  - a. Much more slowly than the sighted worker,
  - b. slower than average,
  - c. in the same amount of time,
  - d. less-than-average length of time,
  - e. extremely less time

I. Accident Rate

- 1. Does he employ safety devices on all power-driven machinery? Some? None?
- 2. Are the machines that are operated, or the ones which the employer believes could be operated by the blind worker accompanied by a safety device?
- 3. Does he believe the accident rate per month has, or would, increase, decrease, or remain constant since (if) he employed blind workers?
- 4. Does he believe that blind workers have, or would have:
  - a. a greater number of accidents than the sighted,
  - b. slight increase,
  - c. no noticeable difference,
  - d. slightly less,
  - e. great deal less.
- 5. Does the employer believe that employment of blind workers has increased, or would increase his yearly cost of Workmen's Compensation Insurance, and or, his accident insurance,



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